The Cleanser and the Näkki

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The Cleanser and the Näkki

by SectoBoss

Summary

Lost in the Silent World, Emil Västerström runs across a very unusual type of troll.

Notes

This is my contribution to the näkki-Lalli craze!
The näkki is a Finnish water spirit that disguises itself as a beautiful man or woman in order to lure travellers to a watery doom. They're said to be beautiful singers as well. The aspect about their backs being hideous is less commonly associated with the näkki legend, but I've kept it for the heck of it.
If you want a good look at what Lalli's meant to look like here, I based his (frontal) appearance off of Rabbit's excellent drawing here.

näkki: *the näkki is one of the rarest forms of troll, and there is much debate over its nature in academic circles. Named for the creature from Finnish folklore who sits by bodies of water to lure in unwary travellers, the näkki is an exceptional type of troll in both appearance and behaviour. Unlike most infected they retain almost all of their human appearance, with some reported cases still found in the clothes they wore before infection. While from the front almost no traces of infection are present, the back of the näkki is heavily mutated. Some reports have claimed they are still capable of human speech, and attempt to lure unwary passers-by into their bodies of water to drown. Extreme caution should be taken when engaging this subspecies of troll. Reports that the näkki are distressed by the names they held before infection have not been confirmed and are therefore not to be relied upon.*

Emil Västerström was running for his life.

He charged through the forest, his boots kicking up sprays of autumn leaf litter, his breath wheezing ragged in his chest. Trees and fallen logs loomed out at him from the pitch black of the night, branches reaching up and out like troll claws to snag him and trip him up. He dodged around one tree, vaulted a fallen log and was just casting a terrified, tear-stained look over his shoulder when his shins smashed into a second log and he was sent sprawling. His assault rifle tumbled from his hands and clattered across the ground. He moaned in panic and groped around for it. *No, no, no, don't drop that, gods no…* With a gasp of relief his blindly grasping hands met cold metal and he clutched the weapon for all he was worth, cradling it to his chest as he staggered back to his feet.

The sounds still rang in his ears, even though he was too far away to hear them. Human screams, troll snarls, the *fwoom* of flamethrowers and the chatter of automatic fire. They'd come out of the trees, come up behind them, *dropped down on top of them*… gods! And he'd run, like a coward! He'd seen one thing, one slithering monster, ooze its way down from a branch and drape almost lovingly across the cleanser next to him – little Oskar, only sixteen, never complained when you made him carry the fuel tanks or do the chores, so eager to please – and he hadn't even looked back at the wet slobbers and the high-pitched shriek of agony. He'd just run, out into the Finnish forests, into the night, into the Silent World.

Something rose in his stomach and he forced it back down. Rough bark and soft moss rubbed against his skin as he leaned against a tree and fought to catch his breath. Calm down, calm down, *think*. That was what they taught you in the cleanser schools. Take inventory, take stock. What have you got?

Nothing, I've got nothing, I'm lost in the silent world, I don't have a map or a compass and the trees are so thick I can't see the stars not that I can navigate by the stars anyway and I don't have any provisions or even any water all I've got is this gun might as well save the last bullet for-

Somewhere to his left an owl screeched and Emil had to stuff his knuckles into his mouth to keep in his screams. He looked around wildly, peering into the murk. A flutter of wings in the trees above him faded into the distance. He let out a ragged breath and his legs almost gave way in relief.

"This isn't fair," he whimpered to himself. "This really isn't fair! I wasn't supposed to *be* here! I was supposed to be in Copenhagen!"

Sure, he was supposed to be in Copenhagen. Uncle Torbjörn's little expedition had been all planned out, and then just two weeks before they were supposed to get the train down to Oresund they got news that their *stupid* Finnish scout had disappeared on a routine night mission. Just left his base one evening and never came back. So that was one down, and then their driver – that scout's sister or cousin or something – dropped out as well in the wake of that. And there was no way they could venture out without either a scout *or* a driver, so that was that for the expedition. Back to the barracks for Emil, back to a life of no promotion prospects and polishing his commander's boots.

So when a member of the logistics corps had tacked a flyer to the base's bulletin board asking for volunteers to help the Finns cleanse the area around Keuruu over the winter – with the unsubtle hint, halfway down the page, that signing up would look good when the higher-ups came to decide who deserved to get that coveted extra star on their rank badge – Emil couldn't get his name down fast enough.

He was beginning to regret that decision.

All around him the trees loomed, thick and oppressive, crowding him. He tried to listen for anything creeping up on him but could barely hear a thing over the huff of his breath and the thud of his heart. A tank battalion could be driving past him and he doubted he would hear anything. Again he looked around him, and again he saw nothing-

No, wait! What's that?

Emil squinted into the night. There, amongst the trees off to his right. Was that… was that a light?

It was. Dim but getting brighter, a faint, slightly eerie blue light was filtering through the trees. Emil's heart soared. Rescue! Or maybe even the lights of Keuruu itself! He grinned a slightly manic grin and had to stop himself from crying out in joy. There could still be things stalking him, after all. With one last glance around him he set off towards the glow, keeping low, trying to remain unseen.

He got maybe a hundred paces through the forest before the trees opened out into a clearing, stopping abruptly like they dared not go any further. The light was brightest here and Emil tucked himself behind a trunk while he waited for his eyes to adjust to it. Eventually he peered around the tree and his mouth flopped open at what he saw.

There was no rescue party, no military base, just a small pond, a little pool of water like you seemed to find everywhere in this accursed country. The water looked clean and cool but also a little forbidding, like it might be a lot deeper than his eyes told him it was. And it shone,

too, or seemed to – that strange blue light that had drawn him over here was emanating from the water's surface, washing the whole clearing with a dim cobalt hue.

He didn't pay the water much mind, though, not once he saw who was sitting next to it. A young man, probably the same age as him, perched on a rock at the other edge of the pool and dangled his bare feet in the water. He wore simple clothing, a battered tunic open at the neck and crude trousers woven from hemp, and his hair was gleaming silver. As Emil watched, boggling at the newfound depths of idiocy Finns could plumb – *going for a bath in the Silent World?* – he tilted his head back and began to sing in a soft, breathy voice.

Emil's eyes went wide and panic tied a knot in his guts. Did this moron not know noise attracted trolls? He stepped out from behind the tree and waved, palms-down, in a shushing motion.

"Hey! You there!" he hissed. "Keep it down!"

The young man's head snapped down at the sound of Emil's voice and he gazed searchingly across the clearing with rich, golden eyes. He grinned a wide and happy grin as their gazes met and against all reason Emil felt a stab of something that was most certainly *not* panic or unease.

Now is really *not the time,* he scolded himself. The young man spoke a few words of Finnish that ended with a quizzical tilt of his head. Emil silently cursed the strange language of these forest people that seemed to be nothing but vowels.

They gave the cleansers rudimentary language training before they sent them out to places where Swedish wasn't understood and Emil racked his brains. Between what little he'd been taught and what little of that he'd listened to, his Finnish was all but non-existent. Haltingly he babbled out a sentence that he dimly remembered, trying to convey his situation – *there's been an attack, my unit's wiped out, I'm lost, the Cleanser Central Finance Bureau will reimburse you greatly if you take the trouble to direct me back to civilisation*. He didn't recall the Finnish for 'reimburse' so he ended up just rubbing his thumb against his fingers in what he really hoped was a universal gesture for 'money' and not something rude over here.

The young man watched his little performance with an amused little smile and laughed out loud – he had a beautiful laugh, Emil thought distractedly – when he had finished. Again he spoke and again Emil understood not a single word. He understood even less when the young man rose to his feet and calmly shed his tunic, revealing pearly skin that gleamed in the faint blue light that Emil dimly realised he still had no explanation for.

"What… what are you doing…?" Emil spluttered in confusion.

If he noticed that the young man's tunic had opened from the back, rather than the front, and its edges were ragged and stained a deep dark red, he gave no sign.

The young man favoured him with another smile, and began once more to sing.

It was a lovely song, lilting and soft, both happy and mournful, all the more wonderful for being so utterly alien to Emil's ears. Emil was captivated by it as the young man started

wading through the pond towards him. He tried to decipher the words, even though he knew he couldn't. Something to do with the moon, and the stars, the breath of the forest and the bones of the earth, sorrow for the departed and joy at the face of a newcomer… his head reeled. He felt almost drunk on the song, scrabbling for a purchase on reality even as all he wanted to do was let go and lose himself in the music.

The young man passed through the deepest parts of the pool, the water lapping at his ankles, waist and then chest, before rising back out as the bottom sloped back up towards Emil.

Some itch, some last tatter of self-preservation, screamed in the back of Emil's brain that something was horribly wrong, but the song snuffed it out. Barely minutes after a vicious attack that had left his friends dead and himself lost and alone, Emil would have been hard-pressed to remember he had ever been a cleanser in the first place. His assault rifle, which he had cradled warily in his arms ever since clapping eyes on the young man, dropped uselessly to his side as his arms went limp.

A drop of water fell from the young man's silver hair, slithered down the curves of his thin neck and onto his bare chest. Emil watched it go, entranced. The song spoke of warm waters and sunlit glades. The young man reached out for him and he took a single, stumbling step forward.

A thin arm wrapped around his waist and even through his thick clothing Emil could feel the comfortable warmth of the other's body. Another hand found the back of his head. Golden eyes looked deep into his and all the secrets of the world seemed locked up in them. Soft hair touched his face and wet lips moved towards his own.

Deep in his head, that song-smothered rag of instinct offered up one desperate memory.

An awkward knock on a wooden door, checking a scrawled piece of paper to make sure he's got the right room. The door creaks open a peep and tired eyes stare out at him.

"Yes? What do you want?" the woman asks him, noticing his cleanser uniform and speaking in Swedish.

"Ah… hello. Tuuri? Tuuri Hotakainen?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Emil. Ah, Västerström." He offers his hand, which she ignores. "I just, umm, wanted to say hello."

Tuuri eyes him suspiciously. "Oh. Well, hello." The door starts to close on him.

"And that I'm sorry!" he blurts out.

The door stops, opens again. "About what?"

"Well, you know… sorry for your loss."

"And what would you know about that?"

"I, ah, I was supposed to be with you two. In Copenhagen. I was slated for the team as well, before… before… well…" he trails off, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Tuuri's expression softens a little. Not the kind of visit she was worried this was, thank the gods. "Perhaps you'd better come in?" she says.

Inside is untidy, old clothes and typewritten reports strewn all over the cramped wooden room. It's that sort of untidy that develops suddenly after a normally neat person just gives up one day. Tuuri sits on the bed and Emil stands by the door, as if ready to flee if he makes a fool of himself. They talk for a little while. Tuuri tells him about Lalli. Motions to a picture on a low shelf.

Emil picks it up and studies it. Three people, clearly all related. Tuuri on the right, smiling and happy, wearing a ponytail she has since gotten rid of. A man in the middle, behind the other two, stood over them like a guardian, a morose expression on his face. And on the left, Lalli, the opposite of his cousin by his side. Stick thin and tall, gazing off to the side like he neither knows or cares what the camera in front of him is for. Thin features under the same grey hair they all share.

As he leaves, Emil says something stupid. "He may still be alive, you know."

Tuuri just looks at him. "He's been gone five weeks in the Silent World, Emil. I pray to every god I know that he's dead."

And she closes the door.

Emil's eyes went wide as he finally recognised the young man who was a hair's breadth from his face. The same thin face, the same silvery hair, but with entrancing eyes and a wicked little smile that seemed so alien now on the disinterested face he remembered from the photograph.

"I know you," he murmured, as the young man's song stopped. Lips that had been about to touch his hardened into a scowl, the eyes looked at him warily.

"Don't know why I didn't see it earlier," Emil continued, mumbling like a man half asleep. Around his waist a hand clutched like a claw. Muscles tensed.

"You're Lalli Hotakainen."

The effect was horrific.

The young man screamed. His face screwed up and he wailed, a piercing howl of anguish and pain. Emil jerked out of his stupor as the young man – as Lalli – stumbled backwards away from him, holding up his hands as if to ward off a blow. Blinking in confusion, wondering how he'd gotten here and what was happening, he just looked dumbly on as Lalli collapsed onto his hands and knees.

Emil nearly vomited at what he saw. The young man who had been so beautiful from the front was horrendous to see from behind. His bare back was a twisted mass of growths and broken, bleeding flesh. Pustules shivered and pulsed amongst regrown bone and broken skin. Hoses of flesh, tubes like a nest of snakes, emerged from his back and waved around blindly, their open ends flexing and puckering like hungry mouths.

On the ground in front of him Lalli dug his hands into his ears, trying to block out the awful echo of his name.

[Kill him, take him, he is right there, food for a week, biomass for a month, he's yours for the taking]

No!

[We need flesh]

I won't, I won't, dear gods help me

[Your gods are deaf and We are hungry]

help me please I'm so sorry Tuuri oh gods help me

[Ignore your name! You are not Lalli Hotakainen, never were, never will be, you are Ours now]

Emil staggered back from the mangled body in front of him, whipping his rifle up and pointing it at the thing with shaking hands.

"Stay back!" he shouted, his voice wavering. "Get away from me!"

Lalli looked up at him and moaned something in Finnish, looking pleadingly at the gun, his meaning as clear as day. As the magic his song had woven collapsed to dust Emil saw the

things that crawled in his eyes and he shivered in horror.

[Don't you dare, don't you dare say those words. Remember how We found you, in the world between worlds? This is your chance! To bring another into Our fold! Take it! Take him!]

Painu helvettin!

His finger was tightening on the trigger – and what a mistake *that* would have been – when Lalli spoke, chewing the words out like his mouth was full of gravel.

"Keuruu," he gasped, pointing with a ragged finger out into the forest.

"What?"

"Keuruu," Lalli hissed, pointing again and wheezing. "Keuruu!"

It took Emil a few seconds to realise that he was being given directions.

"Thank you," he whispered, and fled.

He had the good grace to look back this time, as he plunged into the forest once more. Lalli, the last of his magic spent, crawled across the ground and into the cool, soothing waters of the pond. The pipes bursting from his back breathed for him as his mouth and nostrils slipped below the water. Their eyes met – one set clear blue, the other ragged red – for a second, and then he was gone.

Emil turned and ran as fast as he could, towards the bright lights of Keuruu that only now were glittering though the forest.

I heard a tale from Finland, years ago now. There was pond near the military base at Keuruu that had a näkki in it, and all he wanted was to be a human again. Every day he would weep at his reflection in his pond, and every night he would sing himself to sleep with his songs, for he had been a mage before he changed. Then one night a cleanser from Sweden got lost in the forest, and met this näkki. And for some reason, the näkki didn't kill this cleanser like all the other scouts and hunters who had come across his pond. This cleanser, the näkki let go.

Well, they say one good turn deserves another, don't they? The way I heard it, when it was time for him to go back to Sweden, the cleanser refused. Said he had unfinished business in Finland. And from that day on he lived in Keuruu, training as a night scout and also training the soldiers there about cleanser tactics and equipment in return. And then one night he walked out, and no-one really knows what happened after that.

This was fifty years ago, and my friend from Keuruu says they still think they glimpse them from convoys now and then, watching out for anything trying to ambush the soldiers. Sometimes explosives from the base will turn up missing and there'll be fires on the horizon, and they'll find nests burned to the ground. Mages based there think there's something guarding the dreamworld, and whenever they have good luck its traditional to say "thanks to the näkki".

So that's the story of the cleanser and the näkki, as best I know it. Still watching over Keuruu, after all these years.

Collected from General S. Eide, Dalsnes (Norway).

-Excerpt from Scandinavian Folk Tales and Legends, Mora Printworks, Yr 148

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